Rev A. A. Phelps
Boston
Ms.

We beseech you to pause and re-examine this ground before you plant your feet immovably upon it. Have you thoroughly studied the immense, the ramified, the unutterable wrongs of the slave system? Have you searched to the bottom the facts respecting the pernicious social and religious influence which slavery naturally and usually exerts upon society, both the bond and the free; and especially have you deeply investigated its bearings upon the conscience, the piety of slaveholding Christians and churches?

You doubtless admit that slavery is a great evil, and you desire to see it some day abolished. Have you, under a just sense of your own responsibility, inquired how it can ever be abolished peaceably if not by the moral influence of Christians and philanthropists—how this can be applied except to the conscience—how to the conscience except slavery be held forth as morally wrong—how you can by moral means abolish a fondly cherished and deeply rooted sin, unless you rebuke it—and how you can rebuke a slave-holder while you admit that his peculiar circumstances justify his holding slaves, in the true spirit of the system?

Is it asked what ought Mr. W. under his circumstances to do? In our opinion, (if the laws forbid emancipation on the soil) he ought either to remove them where he can emancipate them—or at least proclaim to the world his utter renunciation of the system, and of all participation in it. He ought to treat them as free; to do his utmost to change the slave laws of his state, and thus publicly and solemnly throw the responsibility of slavery's continuing another day, from himself upon the government and its supporters. We do insist that slavery ought to have from his hand not apology, but rebuke—not vindication, but the utmost possible disapproval. Let him if need be, come home and lay his ax at the root of those evils which he would fain remove by trying to clip the remotest branches. Has he no responsibility for the continuance of slavery in his own State? Are there not wrongs and oppressions there which his voice and example are now sanctioning? Let him at least wash his hands of all participation in those wrongs. Else let not the American Board endorse his conduct and virtually say that he may rightly sustain by example a system which degrades, oppresses, and heathenizes men in America, and yet give his life in the service of the American churches to remedy these very evils in Africa.

Again, probably slavery never can be abolished without great sacrifices of property and of the social esteem of friends. Then who shall make this sacrifice if not the professed missionary of the cross? Will the work ever be done, if each individual is excused from beginning? Does slavery ask or need a more perfect sanction for its perpetuity than Mr. Wilson's principles and practice give it? And shall those principles and that practice be endorsed by all the weight of Christian character and influence which pertains to your Board and to the churches which you represent?

We cannot forbear to express the hope that you will re-consider this whole subject, felt by us to be one of momentous interest, and that you will wisely adopt that course which will most speedily make oppression cease, and bring on the reign of universal righteousness.

MINISTERS' NAMES.

ACTION OF THE CHURCHES.

At a meeting of the Church

of it was

voted that we approve of the above Memorial, and adopt the same as the sense of this church.

Attest,

Clerk.

Memorial of The General Association of Western Reserve to the A. B. C. F. M.

It being understood by us that your Board have had in their service as Missionary to Africa, for the past six years, Rev. J. L. Wilson, a known slave-holder, and that you have recently published the fact, apparently to justify your course in thus employing and sustaining him; it being also at least probable on the authority of Mr. W., that several other missionaries of your Board are slaveholders; and it being moreover generally believed that the Board, though often solicited to express some disapproval of slavery, have hitherto uniformly refused to do so; but have, on the contrary, by a deliberate and avowed silence, given the slave system their implied sanction, the only sanction it asks or needs of the American Church, we have therefore felt ourselves solemnly bound to set before your Board our views of your conduct in these particulars, and our grievances thence resulting.

It is possible that in some minor points of this subject we have misapprehended the action or the intentions of your Board. If so, an explanation will be received most gratefully, and whatever implied censure, our suggestions, founded on our present views of the case, may carry, we shall with the utmost pleasure recall, so far forth as the real facts in the case shall render it inapposite. We suppose our views of the facts to be substantially correct; else we should not build upon them the appeal we now present you.

We have long been the friends and patrons of your Board. The cause of missions among the heathen—our common cause—lies near to our hearts, as also we doubt not it does to yours. We have been happy to sympathize in the general confidence reposed in the Board, and in the extensive and ardent zeal with which its efforts have been sustained by the prayers and benefactions of the churches. Many of your missionaries are our personal friends.

We therefore suppose it perfectly proper to address you by way of memorial.

We hold it to be true beyond all question and all need of labored proof,

That American slavery is a system of enormous iniquity and wrong, pregnant with immense evils to both master and slave, to our nation, to the Church, and to mankind;

That no power will suffice to abolish slavery peaceably except the moral power of love and of the gospel of Christ;

That hence the responsibilities of American Christians to rebrobate the system in plain terms, decidedly, and by all appropriate means, is unquestionable and momentous;

And that consequently when churches, or their great official organs, give this system either their silent, or their implied, or avowed sanction, they wrong humanity, dishonor the gospel, paralize its saving power, and incur the displeasure of its Beneficent Author.

We are not satisfied that you should give slavery even the sanction of your silence. Your disposal of the subject at your annual meeting, September, 1841, re-affirmed last Jan'y, is by no means satisfactory. You have spoken decidedly and rightly against Sabbath breaking, intemperance, and licentiousness, especially where they have interfered with your missionary efforts. American Slavery does the same thing in regard to evangelizing Africa; then why do we hear no rebuke of this interference from your Board? American slavery practically wrests the Bible from, and heathenizes more than two millions of our oppressed countrymen; has a missionary Board nothing to say in regard to such things?

You have denounced in no measured terms the injustice and oppression which the red man has suffered from the very government under which we live; which evils are not a tithe of what the colored race has suffered at our hands; shall the less wrong be sternly rebuked, and the greater be passed in silence?

You set forth in glowing and just colors the evils of superstition, ignorance, and vice as felt by the six hundred millions abroad; why should you be deliberately and resolutely silent respecting the same evils endured by nearly three millions at home?

Pertinent and cogent especially is this appeal to you in view of the fact that these evils are inflicted by men who ask the sanction of your silent approbation, and you are understood by them to give it!

The slave system in our nation lives by the sanction, silent or expressed, of the Church, and dies without it. The sanction of the American Board, the slaveholder promises to pay for liberally with his blood-stained gold; will you take the gift, by silence endorse the system, and seem to suppose that you sanctify the deed by casting the gold into the treasury of the Lord?

You are understood to reply that you cannot judge the hearts of the donors to your Board—cannot sift out and exclude all funds unrighteously obtained.

We expect of you neither omniscience to discern, nor super-human power to exclude all unrighteous offerings. But we certainly may ask you to let the slave-holding community know that you reprobate the system of slavery. If you had spoken as distinctly in condemnation of slavery as you have of Indian oppression, or of intemperance and licentiousness; if your agents at the South and your official transactions had maintained a similar tone of firm, unambiguous rebuke towards this iniquity, you would have heard no complaints from us for receiving the proceeds of unrequited slave labor.

On this point we beg leave to suggest that there is a medium path where on the one hand impossibilities are not attempted, and on the other the great principles of righteousness are not sacrificed. Perhaps this path will be rendered at least visible by the aid of analogous cases.

If the agents of those merchants who ship alcohol to the Sandwich Islands were to appear before your Board and urge the great delicacy of your intermeddling with their commercial relations, and adroitly hint that any overt action on your part must greatly abridge the donations which you might otherwise expect from their fraternity; would you deem it wise or right under such solicitations to hold your peace, and leave the sin and the enormous mischiefs of intemperance unrebuked!

If Fanny Elsler were to visit Boston and publicly propose to perform one week upon the stage for the special benefit of the Board, would your body by a grave and most respectable committee, announce to the public that you have no opinion to express concerning the theatre!

Now in these suggestions of ours we do not imply that the Board ought to become a temperance, or a moral reform society. Neither do we ask you to become an anti-slavery society, and devote yourselves exclusively, or even chiefly, to the work of abolishing slavery. But we do believe that a common bond of union ought to bind together all benevolent and reform societies—that they ought to render each other all the incidental aid which they wisely can—that by all means they ought not to throw obstacles in each other's way—that one ought never to pull down, what another, for the gospel's sake, and for humanity's sake, would build up. These positions seem to us too plain to be a moment doubted.

In carrying out these doctrines in practice we solicit your attention to the inquiry whether they do not demand of you a distinct avowal of the fact that you regard slavery as a grievous moral wrong, and its gains as the fruit of a system of iniquitous oppression!

On this subject, moreover, we respectfully suggest to your Board that the time of possible neutrality is past. If the subject had not been under discussion—if the moral right and bearings of the system were not agitated—if Slavery were not, as she now is, insolently demanding the favor of the Church, or at least its permission to hold on for the indeterminate present, that is, as long as the human heart loves power, indolence, and lust—if such as these were not the circumstances under which your Board is called to act, you might plausibly find neutral ground. But now your course neither is neutral, nor is it so regarded, nor can it be, either by the slaveholder, or by enlightened Christians in our own or in other lands.

It is with unfeigned and poignant grief that we revert to the relation of Mr. W. to your Board. It seems from the testimony that you knew him to be a slaveholder and yet sent him to be your missionary. If we do not misinterpret your object in giving publicity to his letter, you mean to endorse his attempted self-justification. Then you say to the American churches and to the world, that at least such slaveholding as his, is no disqualification for the gospel ministry—no moral wrong. Yet he does not in any wise repudiate the system. He does not proclaim or even admit its intrinsic iniquity. He does not attempt to throw off the personal responsibility of an individual slaveholder. You will not therefore claim that your relation to Mr. W. is in regard to slavery, neutral ground. The plea that your Board has nothing to do with slavery is now (it would seem) to be withdrawn; the ground shifted, and slavery is henceforth to receive your open, explicit sanction.

Rev. Henry Cowles.
Oberlin July 19. 1842.

Oberlin July 19. 1842

Rev A. A. Phelps

Dear Brother

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I venture to transmit to you the within memorial, supposing it possible that you may think best to set in operation a similar train of efforts among your brethren in Mass. Of course you are familiar with the whole subject, & are much better able than myself to foretell its bearings for good or evil upon the Board or the Christian public. You can also readily see the reasons which induced us to take this step prior to any more decisive one which might arise in detaching from the Board the confidence & aid which we have long awarded them.

Is it not plain that there should be a strong & general expression of feelings made to the Board by Anti Slavery men & that this very year is the time? If they could be moved to the right action, or even towards it, great good would be the result. If the effort fails utterly to move them, it cannot well be lost upon a mass of thinking men who know their right hand from their left. Such men there are throughout the land & their position in regard to the Board is a point which it were not well for them to despise.

How much can be done in Mass.?

Who shall present the memorials to the Board next September? Perhaps you will confer with Bro Leavitt on this point. We only want to have it done in the best way.

Yours with much regard in the best of causes

Henry Cowles